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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes "confused history" on the part of students and where that confusion might originate. The study is based on a modified form of content analysis of articles by R. Lederer. The articles offer a compilation of student errors in history and geography. Two major categories of errors are recognized: (1) Type I, represented by errors not necessarily representative of historical misconceptions, includes misspellings, silly sentence construction, phonetic mix-up, substitution of unknown words with known words, and transposition of similar sounding consonants; and (2) Type II, perhaps representative of deeper misconceptions, involves conceptual errors and misguided or "fuzzy logic." This second category may have a greater impact on the scholarly representation of history for the student and the teacher. Examples of each type of error are analyzed with suggestions made for correction. (EH)

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Fractured History and Geography: An examination of why students choose "wrong" words to write and talk about social studies topics.

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[1] The authors' names are listed in alphabetic order as they contributed equally to the preparation of this paper.

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Fractured History and Geography: An examination of why students choose "wrong" words to write and talk about social studies topics.

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People often believe that kids say the darnest things but, in their innocence, kids are only trying to express themselves and communicate their ideas to a world with unwritten but accepted grammatical and social rules. Children never laugh at their statements, it is only adults who find it humorous.

Student historical information has been publicized in the media as humorous representations of misinformation on the part of school children. Richard Lederer has collected, edited, and published articles (Lederer 1993a) and even books on "Student Bloopers" in history and English (Lederer 1987, 1993b). One version, one of many available on the World Wide Web (Lederer 1993c), appears to be an early version of his compilation of student errors entitled "The World According to Student Bloopers," later published as *56 B.C. and All That* (Lederer 1993a). For example,

> "The sun never set on the British Empire because the British Empire is in the East and the sun sets in the West"

or a liberal interpretation of Roman conquests with the sentence

> "History calls people Romans because they never stayed in one place for very long."

Humorous, yes. Indications of student misconceptions of history,

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maybe. Maybe incomplete teaching on the part of the teacher.[1] The statements, though amusing when viewed from a "knowing" perspective should cause teachers to pause. Confused history should indicate to teachers that their students have made incomplete or erroneous connections between their past knowledge and new material being presented. An analysis of "errors" can provide a glimpse into the workings of developing minds.

It is impossible to draw any firm conclusions about the student thinking which resulted in the funny errors due to the fact that we do not know the context in which they were written, other than Lederer's introductory comments, "I have pasted together the following history of the world from genuine student bloopers collected by teachers throughout the United States, from eighth grade through college level" (1993a, p. 51). However, it may be safe to make a few assumptions about the nature of the errors.

Many of the errors represent simple misspellings or incorrect sentence construction, others might represent a more deeply imbedded form of misconception of historical knowledge and inappropriate logic formulation. These second types of errors should have more serious implications for teachers. For the purpose of this paper, we decided to take a closer look at two articles Lederer has written to determine if we could sort the "Bloopers" into specific categories related to student acquisition of historical knowledge and formulation of historical concepts.

Utilizing a modified form of content analysis, Mr. Lederer's articles were broken down, sentence by sentence and written on individual note cards. The cards were then analyzed and put into categories as to the type of error that the sentence seemed to represent. Some of the sentences had errors that overlapped into more than one specific category, therefore duplicate cards were made for each category. The errors fell into two major groups, with sub-groups falling within the two. The first group, which we labelled Type I for ease of discussion, is represented by errors that are not necessarily representative of historical misconceptions. Mistakes were of the nature of misspellings, silly sentence construction (writing errors), phonetic mix-up, substitution of unknown words with known words, and transposition of similar sounding consonants. Another subcategory which might also fall into this area is reader humor. This subcategory might not be noticeable to all readers, but for certain readers with specific knowledge these would be considered a complete misuse of terminology. Examples of these types of errors are given in a later section of this paper.

The second major category, Type II, involves what might be representative of deeper, more serious misconceptions. The subcategories included here involve conceptual errors and misguided or "fuzzy logic". This category may have a greater impact on the scholarly representation of history for the student and the teacher. If left uncorrected, misconceptions and fuzzy logic may lead to more serious problems on the interpretation of

history than those in the other category might. The impact might be in **how** and **what** the student focuses on in more advanced social studies investigation and how the teacher reteaches or continues to teach the material.

Type I Errors

In this section, we will look at examples of various Type I errors, starting with reader humor. Examples of this type of humor, which might say as much about the reader as the student writing the sentence, makes perfect sense to some readers, even if the sentence structure is awkward.

"He died a horrible death, being excommunicated by a bull." This sentence comes from the paragraph reading

> "Martin Luther was nailed to the church door at Wittenberg for selling papal indulgences. He died a horrible death, being excommunicated by a bull."
>
> (Lederer 1993a)

This sentence makes perfect sense to a historian of the Catholic Church. Excommunication, an act which prevented a person from participating in his or her Church and entering heaven upon death, would have been effected by a "Papal Bull," an official decree issued by the Pope. In Martin Luther's case, the Pope was Pope Leo X, earlier known as Cardinal de' Medici, the son of Lorenzo the Magnificent, ruler of the Florentine republic. One feature of this illustration is the apparently misplaced phrase, "being excommunicated by a bull." Several other examples of this type, the misplaced phrase are offered for our enjoyment by Lederer.

Misplaced Sentence Phrase

Few writers never suffer the embarrassment of attaching an explanatory phrase to a sentence in an awkward place. The student who wrote

> Early Egyptian women often wore a garment called a calasiris. It was a sheer dress which started beneath the breasts which hung to the floor.

certainly did not intend to write about a woman with mammary hyperplasia. It was probably a teacher stressing how the Gettysburg Address was composed who prompted a student to write

> Abraham Lincoln wrote the Gettysburg Address while traveling from Washington to Gettysburg on the back of an envelope.

These errors, not uncommon in casual speech, become funny in written form. This is not a new occurrence, having been included in the list of 25 categories used for tabulating errors in clear statement when Graves and Hodge examined English prose-works of the 1918-1941 period (Graves and Hodge 1943, 1970). Numbers 10 and 19 were, respectively

> 10. MISPLACED WORD OR PHRASE. *Every word or phrase should be in its right place in the sentence.*
>
> and
>
> 19. CONFUSED SEQUENCE OF IDEAS. *The order of ideas in a sentence or paragraph should be such that the reader need not rearrange them in his mind.*
>
> (Graves and Hodge 1943, 1970, p. 178)

It seems things were little different fifty to 100 years ago.

Spelling Errors

Many of the errors are only funny because when words are misspelled, their ensuing meaning makes sense in a wry sort of way. Here are some examples of the spelling errors (Lederer

1993a) which make reading history more enjoyable.

Precedent for President as written in	Abraham Lincoln became America's greatest Precedent.
Ramons for Romans and Geeks for Greeks as written in	Eventually the Ramons conquered the Geeks.

This pair of errors is interesting in that it only occurs in the many electronic versions of the bloopers, not the *National Review* (Lederer 1993a) version.

Dames for Danes as written in	King Alfred conquered the Dames.
singers for signers as written in	Thomas Jefferson, a Virgin, and Benjamin Franklin were two singers of the Declaration of Independence.
dessert for desert as written in	They [referring to ancient Egyptians] lived in the Sarah Dessert and traveled by Camelot.

Even with spell-checkers, students and adults will not be immune to errors such as these.

Another category of errors is that where students used a word with which they were familiar rather than the proper word. This includes, probably one of the classic substitutions, that of "pyramids" for "Pyrenees" when referring to Hannibal's march to Rome. Typical of these would be the following examples

wedlock for hemlock as written in	Socrates died from an overdose of wedlock. (Lederer 1993)
squabs for squaws and porpoises for papooses as written in	The Indian squabs carried porpoises on their back. (Lederer 1996)
mustarded for mustered as written in	King Harold mustarded his troops before the Battle of Hastings. (Lederer 1993)

blue-bonnet plague for bubonic plague
and
boobs for bobo or boboes as written in

And victims of the blue-bonnet plague grew boobs on their necks.

(Lederer 1993)

The list goes on; porcupines for concubines, Spanish gorillas for guerrillas, intolerable for invulnerable, garlic for garlands, etc. Graham Forst (1992), writing in the *World Press Review*, offered an explanation for these incorrect words and spellings. "A word is heard; the unlettered mind is unfamiliar with it, so it is transformed into something logical to the child -- as when the construction vehicle with the plow in front becomes a 'bullnoser'."

Several of the examples found in both articles (Forst 1992 and Lederer 1993a) show a lack of understanding of military type words and information. As cited above, few students understand the meaning of "muster," as in "to gather or convene" or would know why the desire to "keep and bear arms" would be any different from "bare arms." Students use words which make "sense" in their worlds.

Spelling errors, sentence construction, and using known words for unknown words seem like almost forgivable (natural?) errors on the part of students who are amateur historians. However, the more serious of problems, conceptual errors, fuzzy logic and miscues due to auditory intake and verbal output might prove to be much more lasting and damaging for future reference.

Type II Errors

Conceptual Errors

The class of errors which should be of concern to teachers is the class of conceptual understanding errors. We suggest that possibly students develop the conceptual understandings that they do as a result of how teachers present material, example one below, or what they do not present, example two below. Statements which reflect these types of constructions can be corrected through classroom procedures.

When the student wrote, "The greatest writer of the futile [sic] ages was Chaucer, who wrote many poems and verses and also wrote literature," was he or she expressing an understanding that literature, as experienced by many students, is prose, often pictureless text which is found in anthologies and textbooks. On the other hand, poetry and verse look entirely different and are found in books of poems. The treatment of prose and poetry in schools, at least remembering my school days and what I have observed in schools to not be much different from my memories, is very different also--one seldom looks for rhythm, meter, and rhyme in prose. Was the student expressing a logically constructed understanding of the differences between prose and poetry? Without interviewing the student, we can only speculate.

Another student wrote, "Julius Caesar extinguished [sic] himself on the battlefields of Gaul. The Ides of March murdered him because they thought he was going to be made king" (Lederer 1993, p. 51). Few students are familiar with the power of

divination or other horoscopic readings on the lives of ancients. For the Romans, as was true for the Greeks and other ancient peoples, Western and non-Western, oracles, auguries, and fortune tellers played an important role in everyday life. Caesar was truly foolish when he ignored the warnings of the soothsayer in Act I (spoken twice) and his servant in Act II. For this student, the Ides of March could easily have been one of the Senate factions who opposed Caesar because he was planning to set himself up as emperor. This was not an unlikely outcome considering Caesar's response to the ultimatum given him by the Senate before he crossed the Po River in northern Italy.

Whether one values or gives credence to horoscopes and divinations, their effect in history has been enormous. Students who understand this fact are better able to understand the role religion has played in history from the ancient Egyptians (Pharaohs and the pyramids) to modern conflicts between Moslems and Christians in Bosnia and Israel with the addition of the Jews. A lack understanding of religion seriously hampers a student's ability to explain history.

Summary

What will recognition of these types of errors that students make in social studies provide for teachers? Quite often the need for mere correction is all that is necessary. In the first category, a correction of spelling or change in sentence wording may be all that the teacher needs to redirect. On this level a teacher is probably more concerned with the physical mechanics of

social studies rather than concepts. Caine and Caine (1991) state that this type of memorization is important for forming the basis of conceptual knowledge and allowing students to develop a means of constructing connections for knowledge.

If the errors fall into the second category, however, the work of the teacher may be much more extensive. Misconceptions of historical concepts may go beyond a simple correction of the fact and may depend on a restructuring of the schemata from which the student draws social studies information.

Endnote

1. History is not the only field with students making "bloopers." Keel (1996) has collected science student bloopers and published them on the World Wide Web as "Astronomy students say the strangest things!" The AAMT published a book, *[sic] Humor* containing bloopers, malaprops, and other humorous material contributed by medical transcriptionists from around the world. From the advertising for the book, "I am wondering if we should not do a CT scan of his head to make sure there is nothing there."

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